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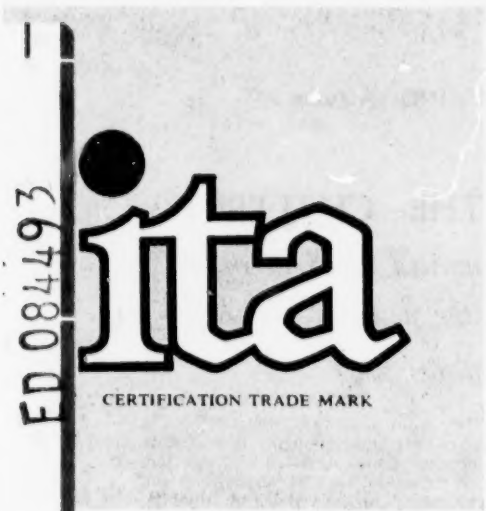
ABSTRACT

In this paper the author examines the more commonly accepted causes of failure in reading and argues that all of them are related to and explained by two major problems: the lack of proficiency in the spoken language and traditional orthography, the medium in which reading is most commonly taught. Each of the factors generally accepted as affecting the child's future success is discussed. These factors and the author's reaction to them are: (1) The spurious nature of the correlation between IQ and reading ability should be recognized and linguistic competence brought into the equation. (2) The correlation between socioeconomic level and reading success is as irrelevant to success in learning to read as linguistic competence is relevant. (3) It is the language spoken orally around the child, not the literature in the home, which is the factor relevant to correlation. (4) The correlation between emotional stability and reading should be classed on its own. (5) Physical amenities of the home should be looked at in terms of language usage in the home, not whether tap water flows. (6) Maturity of the learner relates to success in reading only indirectly through language and associate experiences. (WR)



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Foundation Publication Number 12

Let's Clear The Clutter

The need to bury antiquated ideas in order to accept the new

by Sir James Pitman KBE

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LET'S CLEAR THE CLUTTER

The need to bury antiquated ideas in order to accept the new

SIR JAMES PITMAN, K.B.E.

"I think the people who say they want a new religion are the last to accept anything new. They want novelty right enough. But to stare straight at this life that we have brought upon ourselves and rejected, absolutely smash up the old idols of ourselves, that we shall never do. You have got very badly to want to get rid of the old before anything new will appear—even in the self."

Birkin—*Women in Love*. D. H. LAWRENCE, page 47, Phoenix Edition, 1960. (William Heinemann.)

The Colleges and Institutes of Education are under attack—not only in Britain but in America, Canada, and apparently everywhere, especially for the currently low level of literacy.

It would be wrong, however, to convict without rehearsing the evidence, both for and against, more carefully. Are the charges true and if so does the blame lie with the colleges or should it more rightly be placed elsewhere ?

That children are failing to read or severely hindered in their efforts is undeniable. Dr. Joyce Morris[1] has disclosed that even in as favourable a sample population as the County of Kent, 45 per cent are unfit to advance out of Book III of their reading series after two and one third years of teaching—19 per cent failing to get even beyond Book I.

TABLE 1

READING STANDARDS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE JUNIOR SCHOOL COURSE (1946 AGE-GROUP)

(i.e., children of that age group who were some 7½ years old having been two and one-third years at school.

Standard	*Number of Children*	*Percentage*
Book 1 and below	581	19·2
Books 2 and 3	797	26·4
Book 4 and above	1,644	54·4
TOTAL :	3,022	100

If the series in question be the Janet and John readers, then the child's progress as set out in terms of the minimum time taken for the child to turn over a page can be summarised as Table 2.

TABLE 2

AVERAGE TIME TAKEN TO PROGRESS FROM ONE DOUBLE PAGE TO THE NEXT.

	Calendar days	*School days*	*Percentage of Children*
Here We Go / Book I	47	25	19·2
Book II / Book III	16	8	26·4
			45·6

These are the facts which illustrate all too clearly the inadequacy of present teaching[2]. Book I has thirty-eight pages averaging only thirteen words per page. It introduces only thirty-nine new words, an average of one new word per page—yet, as will be seen, the children's rate of progress was deplorable.

The public and the Press have become very sensitive about reading failure. They are disturbed by the disclosures of how little is known, and how much less seems to have been done, to help the child in his first year at school to learn language in all its four forms—listening and speaking, reading and writing.

The public blames the teachers in the Infant Schools and the lecturers in the Colleges of Education who prepare—or do not prepare, as general opinion would have it—the teachers to teach reading. Many teachers in turn seek to mitigate their share of blame by attacking the Colleges and by pointing out that the years they spent at College did not sufficiently equip them to teach reading—or language. Support for these attacks on the Colleges and teachers has come from many high-level educators. Samples of the evidence are given in the footnote.[3]

Teachers seem to have succeeded in sweeping the blame back to the Colleges but is this fair? *Prima facie* cases are notoriously often wrong. If we can shift the blame from the teachers to the Colleges, can it not with equal justification be moved elsewhere?

The blame lies elsewhere

If we are to place the blame where it belongs, we need to ask a few very fundamental questions: Ought teachers to be taught how to teach reading at College? Are those Colleges which appear to make no effort to do so necessarily wrong? Furthermore how do children learn to *listen*? Do they need to be taught to listen or do

they just learn? Is not reading but an extension of listening? Do parents, uncles, and other adults, 'teach' children to listen and to speak, or do the children 'learn'? For that matter, how do we explain the fact that so far as the teaching of reading may be required, mothers and nursery-maids by the hundreds of thousands have successfully taught children not only to listen and speak, but also to read and to write?

The culprits, I submit, are not the Colleges at all but the pundits of long ago who have ignored all these fundamental questions. If the Colleges wish to counter attack they can do so most effectively not by denying the facts but by changing the target. It has been those pundits of the past who established, and the pundits of yesterday who have continued, the misdirection of thought and of action which have caused the failure.

The Colleges might begin by ignoring what these misleading experts have been saying for centuries and by making their own break from the past; that is to say by promoting radical innovations, which these pundits have never yet considered. The break needs to be a clean one, based on a recognition that it has been the "Generally Accepted Expert Opinion" which, for between 300 and 600 years, has stood in the pathway of success. It seems that we need to clear the clutter of the past before we will be able to achieve a commendable success in the present and the future.

The question has become not whether the Colleges need to make this break on the subject of reading, writing and language but whether they will have the courage to make it now and to resume their leadership. Radical innovations have already begun elsewhere, both in the infant school and in the Education Office, and unless the Colleges reclaim their leadership position soon, they will find themselves carrying the odium of past failures; they may even find those who ought to be their followers divided, and a large column of teachers and of educational officials marching off under a new leadership in a breakaway which they were known to have unsuccessfully opposed. Unless the Colleges renounce prejudice and open their minds to innovations in reading they may well themselves create that split. But as Einstein said "It is more difficult to disintegrate a prejudice than an atom."

A new start

What is needed is not one but two breaks from the past, because there have been two causes of failure in learning language, in all four aspects of it. Neither of these two causes has yet been sufficiently recognized and generally accepted.

To begin with it will be essential to abandon traditional orthography as the initial learning medium. As the late Professor Frank Warburton has stated:

> "There is no evidence whatsoever for the belief that the best way to learn to read in traditional orthography (T.O.) is to learn to read in traditional orthography."[1]

Next it will be essential to recognize that the other equally un-

perceived cause of failure is the linguistic inadequacy in oracy of so many children. Until very recently, there has been insufficient, if any attention, and still less remedial action, directed to this inadequacy.

Some learners, chiefly boys, are defeated by the medium alone, but the great majority are defeated by a combination of both causes—not only by the difficult and harmful medium but also by the absence of an adequate language environment in the home, and by the failure of the expert and the publisher to furnish procedures and materials by which the teacher may diagnose the deficiency and then make it good.

Those who may be ready to consider, and if valid to accept, criticism of the preconceptions of the past, ought to look closely at two areas and to challenge the tenets of "expert opinion" in respect of each of them.

Instead of regarding the axioms of the past as the lay equivalent of the Ten Commandments, we might do better to bring a little scepticism to their origins and applicability, to discover if they are reverenced equally outside the English-speaking world and indeed to ask when they were last validated anywhere and with what result. Only with all this information can we decide which deserve to be continued and which to be rejected.

The Roman Alphabet and Medieval Spellings.

It is hard to see why this ossification of archaic practice should be regarded as the best medium for teaching reading. It does have the backing of many centuries of use, but if our predecessors accepted it as unthinkingly as we do (and research into educational methods is a relatively recent innovation), this is not necessarily a recomendation. Indeed such uninterrupted *and unquestioned* use over centuries might well form a *prima facie* case against the use of T.O., just as the floorboards of a 300-year old house must be approached with great suspicion.

We must ask if anybody has verified by observation that T.O. is right; or has it a sacrosanctity protecting it from such disrespectful inquisitions ?

The disrelationship between the seen and the heard, the spoken and the written language which is incorporated into T.O., does not lend itself easily to the idea that it is the most suitable medium for learning to read. If the advocates of T.O. wish to defend their medium, they must not claim a privileged position. Instead they must produce their evidence that when T.O. is compared to other media it is as successful, and that there is no advantage in relating the written word and the spoken word. Furthermore they must prove that T.O. does not do positive harm to the children it should be helping. They must not be allowed to carry the case by default.

Linguistic Inadequacy

Reading is only one of the many manifestations of language ; speaking and listening are at least as important. If this is not sufficiently recognized, then no effort will be made to test the overall linguistic competence of the new schoolchild, or to give him the extra help that may be initially necessary to bring his linguistic ability up to the standard needed to make learning to read easy.

New techniques will be needed to deal with the child who, alas all too often, arrives at school so deficient in language competence that he cannot understand his teacher's language and falls further and further behind his classmates.

The principles by which a child learns his oral language are deserving of further study together with a greater appreciation of the way in which they relate to other manifestations of language and the advantages that may be obtained from relating all these manifestations in the learning processes.

Longstanding misconceptions

In order to advance in these areas and to let the new ideas which are being propounded receive a fair hearing, there is a need to clear a considerable clutter of misconceptions of the past.

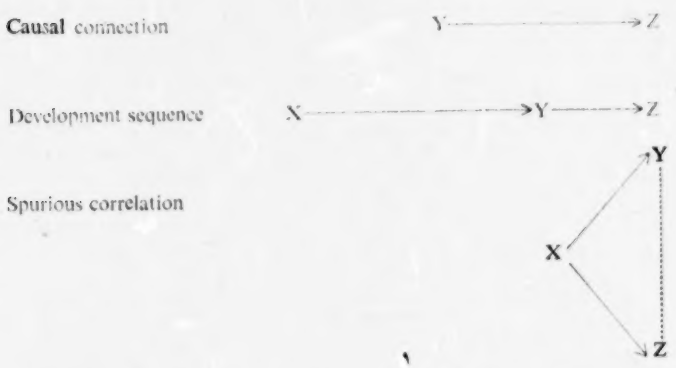
It has hitherto been axiomatic, for instance, that there are at least nine factors greatly affecting the child's future success in learning to read : (1) the child's I.Q.; (2) the socio-economic level of his parents ; (3) the ' culture ' of his home, including particularly the number of books available to him ; (4) the example of his parents in reading silently to themselves for information and pleasure ; (5) the emotional stability of the child ; (6) the deprivation of the child ; (7) the physical amenities in the home ; (8) the ' maturity ' of the learner ; (9) the essentiality of the teacher and the importance of his skill and experience in teaching reading. Indeed it is accepted by the " Generally Accepted Expert Opinion " that correlations at a significantly high level are demonstrable in all of these nine factors, and in others too.

To begin with it may be pointed out that (if this were the case) Shakespeare and many other masters of English literacy must be regarded as the exceptional children who ' prove the rule '. Living in such socio-economic poverty, with no books in the house, with no parents reading to themselves, or to them, with housing which would not now be tolerated, and often with no teacher, trained or untrained, available to teach them, their chances of attaining literacy would be considered low on virtually all of these counts.

Beware of correlations

We must be careful about the too facile acceptance of the reliability of correlations. The existence of a correlation is no certain proof of a causal connection. Because one thing happens after another, it does not mean that one causes the other. It may mean that something else causes the first which then leads to

the second (development sequence) or that both are independently linked to some *quite other* factor and have no connection with each other whatsoever (spurious correlation).



I early learnt the dangers of spurious correlations. An author appeared to have ' lifted ', word for word, and comma for comma, a very large section from another and earlier author. In fact both authors had independently lifted (quite properly but without acknowledgement) from a common source.

In all such cases, while there is an apparent causal connection, we are neglecting the possibility of there being an earlier independent factor X. In the case of reading ability, factor X is the linguistic ability which the child brings with him to the school.

Let us then examine each of the factors in turn :

1. (I.Q.) It has been the degree of competence in oracy which the child has brought to school, rather than his I.Q., which has determined his success in learning to read and write the visual equivalents of the words he knows and uses orally—or will learn and use also orally.

If this were not so, the " jungle child " with the highest I.Q. and a nil exposure to language would be the more quickly successful in learning to read than the child with a much lower I.Q. who came from a home in which not only parents, but also elder brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and neighbours have been constantly speaking to *and listening to* that child, thus providing for him a highly linguistic environment and, in consequence, a considerable linguistic competence.

Noticeably the correlation between I.Q. and reading ability has in the past been upset by children of high I.Q. but low linguistic competence who failed to learn to read, and children of low I.Q. but high linguistic competence who succeeded. This imperfection in the correlation remains a mystery until the spurious nature of the

correlation has been recognised and linguistic competence brought into the equation.

2. (*Socio-Economic Level*). Similarly there are children of parents in the highest socio-economic class who see virtually nothing of their highly linguistic parents and hear little if any language from them because the parents are so often absent from the home. These children have a much reduced chance to become skilled in their mother tongue. Such a child is given no chance if, furthermore, he hears no language from the 'help' (whom the parents engage in default) because the help, while present, is often of a very low linguistic competence, and provides little if any of that rich linguistic environment which most parents supply abundantly. Equally there are children of parents at the lowest socio-economic level (who may have fallen on hard times) who are nevertheless in constant language communication with one another and with all their children. There is thus no mystery.

The explanation of the apparent imperfection—at both ends—of the correlation between socio-economic level and reading success of children is that their socio-economic level is as irrelevant to success in learning to read as their linguistic competence is relevant.

3. (*Culture of the home.*) There are children in homes where, even though the culture is low the linguistic opportunities are high; similarly there are children in other homes where the culture is high but where nevertheless the child is not accorded the opportunity to use language which is alone relevant to the learning of his mother tongue. A non-linguistic environment will negative the most cultural environment.

If the argument is to be advanced that 'culture' and a linguistic environment may be and ought to be regarded as synonymous, the obvious answer is, why mislead everyone by failing to employ the true description?

4. (*The example of parents reading silently to themselves.*) Just as Shakespeare's parents needed to walk miles to read a book and just as he never saw a book in the home, so it is the language spoken, orally, around the child, not the literature in the home which is the factor relevant to the correlation. It is no more than an accident whether the environment of spoken language happens in an environment of printed language or not. In so far as we have supposed that there is correlation between books in the home and success in learning to read, it happens, in modern times, that those parents who are literate and linguistic, usually (but not always) not only give a linguistic environment to their children, but also have books in their homes from which they read and are seen reading.

5. (*Emotional stability.*) It is *at least* as likely that lack of success in learning to write and read after starting school (as an extension of the ability to speak and to listen) will have caused emotional disturbance, as that emotional disturbance will have caused the lack of success.

The disturbance caused to the personality of the child by frustrating his confidence that he will learn to read and write, is surely now well recognized. The harm done by realization of failure—such as that when the child has open before him the same two pages for weeks on end—is harm done to his psyche as well as to his education. Moreover it is likely that failure to become literate is as emotionally disturbing to the child as is so often the clumsiness forced upon a naturally left-handed child by requiring him to conform to a convention of right-handedness. In so far as emotional disturbance may be independent of frustration in school life (and of left-handedness) and lead to failure, such a cause of failure needs to be classed on its own and the correlation may then rightly be regarded as a true one, comparable to that between, say, blindness and reading failure.

6. (*The deprivation of the child*). Surely the very use—or rather abuse—of the word 'deprivation' indicates the absence of that clear thinking which ought to have been brought to the problem of reading failure—but has not. Any stick is good enough to build a cause for failure where the two real causes have been overlooked. 'Deprivation' is an emotional word calculated to arouse sympathy and to shut the mind to the hard task of thinking straight and finding the true cause. Any linguist (and every lecturer and teacher of reading ought to be a linguist) will ask what it was that the child already had which was taken away from him. He certainly was never at any time adequately linguistic nor deprived of whatever minor skill he may have had. Moreover how may the degree of the alleged 'deprivation' be measured in terms of its relevance to a predisposition to success or failure? Correlation is after all a concept of mensuration. Thus even if deprivation were relevant, the concept is too imprecise to be used meaningfully in a correlation.

7. (*Physical amenities of the home.*) The task of learning to read and write is not inherently so difficult that the child is so unable to learn at school that he must also be taught at home. Many of the physical amenities of the home, whose absence would now lead to a house being condemned as unfit for human habitation, are amenities which have been added during the past century. It is whether language, not tap water, flows in the house which is the factor to which reading success correlates.

8. (*Maturity of the learner.*) Maturity is another imprecise term, and so far as it may be said to relate to success in reading, does so only indirectly through language and associated experience, and through situations experienced vicariously from the language of others. Certainly some obviously mature citizens have remained failures in reading and writing all their lives. In contradistinction, 3- and 4-year-old-children, whose maturity is very small, have become fluent readers and writers. Adult non-readers who are in other respects mature may be divided into three classes, those who had no schooling (with whom we are not here concerned),

those who failed solely because of the conflicts in relationship between words heard and words seen (the difficulties inherent in the medium) ; and those who failed by the combination of that cause with the second cause of failure, the very low linguistic competence which they brought to school. Examples of the second class are married men in responsible positions, and mothers, all of whom have been taught to read late in life by the i.t.a. teacher of their children. Examples of the third class have been the hundreds of British soldiers who have been taught to read and write (and have thereby acquired an improved competence in listening and speaking) at The Army School of Preliminary Education.[5]

9. (*A teacher is not so much advisable as absolutely essential. Moreover the best teachers obtain success with all children : success will be assured once all teachers are as good as the best.*)

Neither of these general beliefs is supported by ascertained fact. As mistaken axioms, they are yet other examples of those comfortable myths which have misdirected clear thinking and effective action.

After all, there have been generations of (admittedly linguistic) children who have been successfully taught to read at home. Thus the absence of a qualified and experienced teacher seems not to have prevented success in the past. After all, it is presumably an even more difficult task for a tiny child to have learned oracy (of a language of which he starts with no knowledge at all) than for an older child to learn the visual forms of that language which he already knows. It cannot be argued that a teacher was essential for learning oracy, and the suggestion that a teacher is essential for learning literacy is contradicted by observed facts. What is needed by the child learning oracy is the opportunity to learn : what is needed by the child learning literacy is the opportunity to learn in a suitable medium. When such a medium is provided for learning to read (in replacement of T.O.) the child has the opportunity to learn, and any professional training and qualification for the adult, while no doubt valuable, is not essential.

It is a matter of observation that even when the child is taught " with benefit of a teacher ", every teacher—good or bad—obtains good results with the most apt children—those who have come to school with fluent oracy. A research would possibly yield most interesting results were it to compare the degrees of success of a population of teachers allegedly bad with the degrees of success of those allegedly good, each set teaching with an initial teaching medium groups of children who were highly linguistic and who were apt also in other respects.

We need to question and examine also whether the best teachers do better than the best mothers. If the trained teachers are found to do no better than the best mothers, then all these attacks on Colleges of Education because they do not prepare their students to teach reading, are badly off beam. The Colleges

ought thereafter to be allowed to go about their lawful business in introducing the two innovations which alone will bring success, and in evolving and propagating those new and beneficial philosophies for the teaching of reading by which the old misdirected thinking and practice ought to be replaced.

Moreover it should be obvious that the very best teacher will realize the full potential of her outstanding merit *only* when the conditions are best. Even the best sculler does not row as quickly against the stream as he does with it.

This myth—that the problem will be solved as soon as all teachers have been made as good as the best—does not justify complacency about the conditions under which the teachers have hitherto been required (or have supposed themselves to be required) to operate. Research and observation on a very large scale have shown that these conditions have been conducive to failure for 45 per cent of children, and hindered the progress for the other 55 per cent. There is a clear case that teacher merit, while a factor, is not of that essential importance which the mythology has led all to suppose.

The conditions under which the teacher operates have until recently never been seriously investigated, and consequently little has been attempted to improve them. One of these two conditions has been that same factor common to the earlier eight—the language competence of the child ; the other the medium in which instruction is given.

What are the conclusions ?

In this need to clear the clutter of the past, and for that purpose to promote the new philosophy, there is advantage in studying what innovation meant, a hundred years ago, to the surgeons who accepted the novelty of aseptic surgery : the need for study of fresh facts and for fresh thinking and fresh actions. In those days of not so long ago, while Lister's proposition was gaining slowly its eventual general acceptance, out of the window needed to go all the old and false explanations of the 100 per cent incidence of gangrene—and the 90 per cent deaths which followed. Into the incinerator needed to go the old operating coats, so stiff with the dried blood of patients that they stood upright on the floor. Sterilizing equipment, unheard of before, had to be bought and surgeons trained to use it.

As Birkin said in the quotation which opened this paper : "You have got very badly to want to get rid of the old before anything new will appear."

Certainly there is need in teaching reading, writing and language to think anew, to burn all those old books in which a false mythology of reading failure has been perpetuated, and to take a clean page and a fair pen and write anew.[6]

It is for those who wish to remain in the van to exhibit the open mind and the intelligence which will recognize the falsity of all those

past idols and to have courage in starting to smash them. If not, the classroom teacher will continue to experience failure and to grumble that he was not properly taught at College. Are teachers and lecturers in Colleges of Education of the kind who will concede that need " to study the evidence " and " absolutely smash up the old idols "?

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[1]Dr. Joyce Morris, B.A., Ph.D.: *Reading in the Primary School.* National Foundation for Educational Research, Publication No. 12, 1959.

[2]Dr. Joyce Morris's second report, *Standards and Progress in Reading.* N.F.E.R. 1966, pp. 84–86, has shown that even after 3 years, 4 years and 5 years, the percentages of those Kent children who had not become successful in reading were still 41 per cent, 41 per cent and 44 per cent.

[3](i) " Only one in eight junior teachers has received specific training in reading techniques . . . " I. L. E. A. Literacy Survey, 1967-69. (ii) " To my knowledge, hundreds of head teachers and many inspectors would testify to how ill-prepared newly qualified teachers generally are for their basic task of developing reading skills." Dr. Joyce Morris: Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on Education and Science. House of Commons, 4th March, 1970. (iii) " The majority of probationer teachers considered that they were ill prepared for their task by their training in Colleges of Education." W. K. Gardner. Ibid. (iv) " Of the infant and junior teachers who started teaching . . . 17 per cent reported that they had not received any training in the teaching of reading and a further 29 per cent considered their training to have been inadequate." N.U.T. Survey (1967-1969). 17 per cent + 29 per cent = 46 per cent. (v) "Training courses for prospective infant teachers are the same as those for students who may be teaching specialist subjects in the upper secondary school." Dr. Stephen Wiseman, Director of the National Foundation for Educational Research, giving evidence to the Select Committee of the House of Commons—EDUCATION, 13th February, 1970. p. 173. (vi) " Instead they wanted more courses on reading . . . " Ibid. *Times Educational Supplement*, 13th February, 1970.

[4]*i.t.a. An Independent Evaluation* by Prof. F. W. Warburton and Vera Southgate (Chambers and Murray : London, 1969) p. 234.

[5]Major Colin Stevenson. " i.t.a. with Adult Backward Readers " in Proceedings of the 6th International i.t.a. Conference (1969). *i.t.a. and the Right to Read* (i.t.a. Foundation : London, 1970) p. 60.

[6]Extract from a Press Statement issued jointly by The London University Institute of Education and The National Foundation for Educational Research, on December 3rd, 1969 (following the publication of " *i.t.a. An Independent Evaluation.*"). " Some at least of the resistance to change lies in a rooted unwillingness to consider evidence. Few other areas of educational method have been as well and thoroughly explored as this. We would therefore urge teachers and others responsible for the important decision as to how and by what means reading should be taught, to examine the evidence and to recognize that on what they decide depends the welfare of countless children—especially those who now have difficulties."